

## **Pelagic RAC Mackerel Focus Group Report of Meeting held 31 January 2008**

**Participants:** Christian Olesen (chairman), Gerard van Balsfoort, Sean O'Donoghue and Alex Wiseman (Industry), Christine Absil (Environmental NGOs) and Mark Dickey-Collas, Paul Fernandes and Ciaran Kelly (Scientists).

**In attendance:** Aukje Coers (Pelagic RAC Secretariat) and Derek Duthie (Rapporteur).

The chairman explained the background to the establishment of the Focus Group, the purpose of the meeting and the membership criteria. He reminded participants that the Terms of Reference were as follows:

1. Review the scientific basis for the stock assessment of Mackerel;
2. Examine the possibility of introducing alternative mackerel management arrangements;
3. Develop estimates of past and present unaccounted removals and their impact on the assessment;
4. Explore the various means that fishermen's knowledge can be incorporated into the scientific assessment of mackerel;
5. If appropriate (following from the outcome of the points 1, 2 and 4), propose active measures to deal with the issue of unaccounted mortality.

During the morning session, Ciaran Kelly delivered a presentation describing the fundamental concepts in stock assessments, explaining in detail some of the features of the ICES North East Atlantic mackerel assessment: the data inputs, how the model works and the issues created by having uncertain data. There followed a wide-ranging discussion and debate on the scientific process and the merits of the assessment with industry seeking clarification on a number of issues. This included, the inclusion, or not, of various components of unaccounted mortality, the use of the egg survey as a relative index, the use of a selection pattern to account for smaller numbers of younger fish in the catch and the weaker ability to determine recruitment in the more recent years.

After lunch, industry participants gave their views on stock size, distribution and unaccounted removals which were then compared to those of the scientists. A common industry theme was that the present scientific estimate of the stock did not reflect the high abundance of mackerel seen in the fishing grounds. Industry emphasised the present high levels of compliance in the fishery and expressed a willingness to continue to work to avoid discards/slippage of fish and engage with scientists to improve the data.

## Outcomes:

- All agreed that the explanation of the assessment process had been invaluable and that an ongoing dialogue was essential.
- In trying to address historical uncertainties in the data inputs into the assessment process, the scientists requested industry to provide historical catch and discard data to allow them to re-work the assessment. Industry stated that this information was unavailable. The scientists explained that if this information was not forthcoming, improvement in the accuracy of the assessment would be a gradual process over the medium-term as better catch information fed through.
- It was agreed that it would be useful if ICES convened a Mackerel Otolith Exchange Workshop as there has not been a meeting of this age determination group for some time.
- A number of initiatives were suggested to improve fishing practices, avoid discards and/or improve the scientific database. Participants agreed to give further consideration to:
  - A well-defined code of practice for fishermen
  - Encouraging the widespread use of automated jigging equipment to allow fishermen to sample schools before shooting their nets; or in the event that such equipment was not available a recommendation to take small samples from schools of unknown fish size; in either case, communication with the rest of the fleet as to the location of small schools should be encouraged.
  - Continued trial of net grading panels to allow juvenile fish to escape, including work on survival rates of escapees
  - Investigating how data from vessel wheelhouse equipment such as echosounders could be used
  - Provision of vessel records of weight per individual in catch to their national scientists to help improve catch at age data
  - Industry making vessel resource available to the scientists to enable them to undertake a scouting trip in advance of the triennial egg survey to determine coverage and/or increase the egg survey frequency
  - Establishment of new and harmonisation of existing national observer programmes to increase the amount and consistency of use of discard data